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WASHINGTON POST
21 September 1984

Embassy's Security Was Incomplete

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A suicide truck-bomber was able to drive within 20 feet of the U.S. Embassy annex in Beirut yesterday morning despite increased concern about terrorism because security improvements had not been completed and the terrorists appear to have used diplomatic license plates, officials said yesterday.

The embassy annex was on high alert before the bombing, which killed and injured scores of Lebanese and Americans, because of threats against it and terrorist plots that were recently discovered and foiled, according to U.S. intelligence sources.

But officials said that an outer gate to the embassy compound nonetheless was opened for the van and that steel gates and tank traps, due to be installed soon, still were lying by the roadside. They said the van initially may have been waved forward because of its Dutch diplomatic tags.

One report reaching Washington said a Dutch diplomat apparently had been forced to accompany the terrorist in the truck. The report could not be confirmed last night. A Dutch official said that two Dutch officials were in Beirut at the time of the bombing but that attempts to contact them had been unsuccessful. Another unconfirmed report said that both men in the truck were terrorists and that they were killed in the attack.

The U.S. Embassy annex northeast of Beirut was guarded by Christian militiamen who had been hired and trained after a contingent of 90 Marines was withdrawn last July. The Marines were withdrawn, leaving only 14 to police the inside of two embassy compounds, because officials determined that conditions for the safety of Americans had improved, a State Department official said yesterday.

U.S. officials yesterday defended security at the bombed embassy annex and said damage and casualties would have been far worse if the

van had been able to drive all the way to the annex.

But members of Congress and others criticized the administration for not having learned more from two previous suicide bombings of U.S. installations in Beirut. After passing the first checkpoint, the van had only to weave past four concrete barricades before reaching a straight stretch of road that brought it nearly to the embassy annex door.

"It would seem that security plans for the embassy annex were not completed or were not fully implemented," House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.) said. "Why they were able to get in there I can't understand. It looks like a repeat of what happened to our 241 Marines."

O'Neill was referring to an earlier suicide bomber who drove his truck into the headquarters of a Marine peace-keeping unit early on a Sunday morning last October, killing 241 U.S. servicemen. A Pentagon fact-finding commission later criticized the Marines for not having provided tighter security around the building, especially because a car-bomb had destroyed the old U.S. Embassy and killed 63 people there in April, 1983.

But State Department spokesman John Hughes said the embassy cannot erect the same kind of barriers that a military installation might use.

"One thing you have to remember is that this is an embassy; it is not a military compound or a military barracks or a fort," he said. "An embassy has to operate as a public building."

Richard W. Murphy, assistant secretary of state for Mideast affairs, who briefed senators on the bombing before being dispatched to Beirut, also defended the embassy protection.

"We paid very, very great attention to the security arrangements," Murphy said.

But Hughes stopped short of saying that security measures or intelligence-gathering, which also was

criticized after the Marine headquarters bombing, were adequate.

"I think that that is one of the questions, obviously, we will be looking at," he said.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz told NBC News last night: "... It is interesting and appalling to note that in Beirut just about a month ago the Saudi Embassy was attacked and virtually destroyed. So these things happen to all countries in the Middle East ..."

He told ABC News that the blast proves that "more can be done" to increase security at U.S. posts in the Middle East.

Hughes said the embassy had been at a state of high alert since receiving threats Sept. 8, but he said he did not know of what the alert consisted. Another State Department official, who asked not to be identified, said the alert resulted in "increased vigilance" but no extra guards or barriers.

Other informed U.S. officials said several other terrorist plots against American facilities in Beirut were thwarted in recent weeks, contributing to the heightened state of readiness as much as the warnings. The officials declined to provide details on the ground that sensitive intelligence methods were used to head off the attempts, disclosure of which might jeopardize future access to terrorist groups.

The U.S. Embassy moved most of its employees into the annex in the Christian area of Beirut on July 31 when the 90 Marines were withdrawn, hoping that the new location would increase the employees' security. The old embassy, destroyed in the 1983 car-bombing, was located in Moslem west Beirut.

"The judgment was taken that the situation had improved enough during the summer that it was appropriate to withdraw the Marine security and hire contract guards," a State Department official said.

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